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Target workers in Walnut Creek quit after questions about immigration status

By [Matt O'Brien](#)

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WALNUT CREEK — More than 40 employees at the downtown Target store quit their jobs after an internal probe raised suspicions about their immigration status, according to lawyers who have met with the workers.

Managers summoned the overnight crew of the North Main Street department store to meetings last month and gave workers the chance to prove their eligibility to work in the United States by bringing in the proper documents, the lawyers and Target representatives say.

Most of the questioned workers voluntarily resigned, Target spokeswoman Kate Gillen said. The Minnesota-based retailer would not say how many workers left the Walnut Creek store, but advocates for the employees say it was dozens.

"Forty-five people are without a job," said lawyer Rocio Avila of La Raza Centro Legal, a San Francisco legal group pressing Target for more information. "Many of the workers there were long-term workers. There was one gentleman who had been (at Target) for 19 years, and the average was five to six years. These weren't temporary workers, seasonal workers for the holiday season. These were loyal workers who had been there for a long time."

Avila met with many of the workers and said the group, all of them Spanish speakers, are confused about what happened Nov. 11 and Nov. 12, when supervisors, paychecks in hand, held staff meetings at the beginning of the graveyard shift.

It is unclear, she said, why the predominantly Latino overnight shift was targeted while other employees were not.

"None of the workers are able to articulate exactly what happened," Avila said. "None of these workers ever got anything in writing. None. That's a huge red flag."

The store's probe of so many of its workers was unusual, especially for a brand-name retailer, but may become more common as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement heightens its enforcement of employers who hire illegal workers, whether knowingly or not. The agency this year has launched civil inspections of hundreds of California employers, though Gillen made clear that the Target store was not one of them.

The company, she said, launched its internal investigation on its own after fielding allegations — she will not say from whom — that some of its Walnut Creek employees were working at the store illegally. All American workers must fill out I-9 forms on the first three days of a job to verify their identity and authorization to work legally in the country, so the store began reviewing those forms.

The employees who were being investigated were "given the opportunity to provide Target with further information and documents to reestablish their ability to work in our store," Gillen said in a statement.

Although the retailer uses the program elsewhere in the country, Target said the Walnut Creek store is not registered for E-Verify, the federal database that helps companies confirm the legal status of their workers.

Most of the employees worked late at night and early in the morning, when the store is closed, but employees use forklifts, ladders and their hands to stock the store with newly arrived products. Others clean the store, which has been open since 1999.

The retailer gave no warning to county officials about firing a large group of workers. Companies are required to notify local government following a mass layoff but not if the employees were fired for a special reason or left voluntarily, said Stephen Baiter, executive director of the Workforce Development Board of Contra Costa County.

"We definitely have not formally received any information," he said.